GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

—

HARLEQUIN OR PATRIOT?

BY

JOHN PALMER

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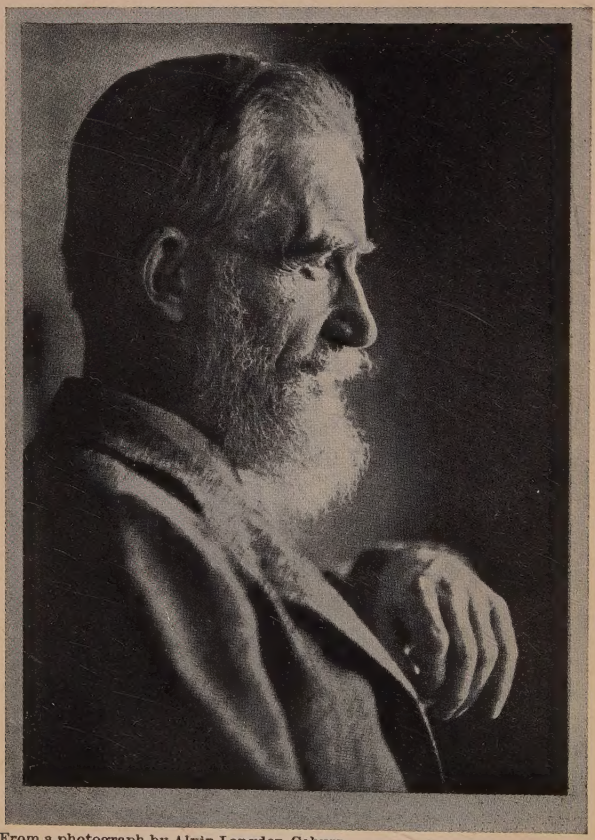

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I

SHAW THE ENIGMA

THE first fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is an immensely public person; that he is a sort of twentieth century Grand Monarch who, if manners allowed, would dine like Louis XIV in the presence of the people and receive the press in his dressing-gown. Now, it is true that Bernard Shaw has been photographed by Alvin Langdon Coburn without a stitch; that at one period of his career he almost lived upon a public platform; that he invariably tells us

the private history of each of his books and plays; that, partly from a sense of fun, and partly from a determination that what he has seriously to say shall be heard, he talks and writes a good deal about himself; and that he has allowed Mr. Archibald Henderson to compile a sort of concordance to his personality.

Nevertheless, it is not true that Bernard Shaw is an immensely public person. Or perhaps I should put it this way: Bernard Shaw whom the public knows is not an authentic revelation of the extremely private gentleman who lives in Adelphi Terrace. The Bernard Shaw whom the public knows might more accurately be described as a screen. What the public knows about Bernard Shaw is either trivial or misleading. Thus the public knows that

Bernard Shaw can read diamond type with his left eye at a distance of twenty-eight inches; that he can hear a note the pitch of which does not exceed 30,000 vibrations per second; that, when he sits down upon a chair, the distance between the crown of his head and the seat is 3 feet, 1.8 inches. These things are trivial. Or the public knows that Bernard Shaw is a very striking and provocative writer of plays, that he is also a socialist and a vegetarian; and these things are misleading.

That is why any satisfactory account of Bernard Shaw rendered to those who have allowed themselves to be deceived by common fame must necessarily take the form of a schedule of popular fallacies. Such a schedule will at any rate be found more useful, and certainly less hackneyed, than a personal "interview"

and description of one who has been more often photographed and handled in the picturesque and familiar way of the expert pressman than the most popular member of the British Cabinet. Perhaps, therefore, I may regard myself as excused from accurately sketching the wicket-gate which leads to Bernard Shaw's private dwelling, or from telling the story of his velvet coat, or from recording the number of times he has been met upon the top of an omnibus (where he used virtually to live), or betraying what he writes to young people in confidence about the nose of a celebrated author.

Intimate revelations of this kind do not take the public far. They do not seriously disturb the inaccessible privacy which Bernard Shaw has always contrived to maintain. The truth is that

the authentic author of "Man and Superman" has never really been interviewed; has never really "plucked me ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut" to visitors who are likely to be hiding a kodak under their coat or to be surreptitiously fingering a note-book. Bernard Shaw of the interviews and the funny stories is public enough; but this Bernard Shaw is almost entirely a legend. Before this legend gets as firm a hold upon New York as it has upon London, it may be well to number some of the more striking fallacies of which it is composed. There is only one serious drawback to this method of approach, and this drawback vanishes almost as soon as it is explained. Exploding popular fallacies is disagreeable work, and it usually gives to the sentences of the author en-

gaged upon it an air of quarreling violently with his readers and with his subject.

Such is not the intention or mood of this present article. I have an immense enthusiasm and liking for Bernard Shaw and for the greater part of most of what Bernard Shaw has written. I claim, indeed, to admire Bernard Shaw for sounder and weightier reasons than have yet occurred to Bernard Shaw himself. These reasons will be presented later in a postscript of appreciation. When the worst fallacies regarding Bernard Shaw have been briefly described and contradicted (it would require a large volume to describe and contradict them in detail), I shall be in a better position to assert, briefly again, wherein Bernard Shaw's genius truly consists; exactly how serious he is; and,

more particularly, why he has just written a pamphlet about the war, and why he ought not to have done so. Meantime I hope that readers of this article will agree to digest the fallacies and to wait for the postscript; also to believe that my habitually indignant manner is simply the result of writing regularly about the British theater.

The first fallacy is already declared; namely, that Bernard Shaw is a public person. The second fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is an easy and profitable subject to write about. He is not. It is true that Bernard Shaw's interviews with the press are the best interviews, and that he invariably galvanizes the dullest of his appreciators into liveliness. Pronounce the name of Bernard Shaw in almost any company, and immediately every one perks up with an

epigram or a paradox or an anecdote. Bernard Shaw like *Falstaff* is not only witty himself; he is the occasion that wit is in other men.

Nevertheless, Bernard Shaw is not a good subject. It is not encouraging to embark upon an enterprise with the sure knowledge that the thing has been done before and better done. Bernard Shaw is not a good subject because he has already been exhausted. There is not more than one expert upon Bernard Shaw. Every one professionally required to write about Bernard Shaw sets out under an unfortunate sense that the ground has already been covered; that the job has already been done brilliantly, thoroughly and finally.

The best essays on the work of Bernard Shaw, the most impartial authoritative, and penetrating, are by Bernard

Shaw himself. The best stories about Bernard Shaw, whether they are the cruel, illuminating anecdotes which delight the envious, or the flashes of resources and honesty which are cherished by his friends and admirers, are once again by Bernard Shaw himself. Should you set out to extol or to advertise Bernard Shaw, you know that this has already been done with incomparable energy and talent, and that it has been done by one who knows. Should you, on the other hand, set out to expose or pull to tatters the reputation and character of Bernard Shaw, again you know that you are the merest amateur compared with G. B. S.; know also that, if you want to do the business effectively, and leave Bernard Shaw obviously for dead on the field of controversy, you will have to call in

G. B. S. to help you. It is possible to slay Bernard Shaw; but it is possible to slay him only in alliance with himself. It is a joke of the two hemispheres that Bernard Shaw better understands his merits than any one else in the world. It is a finer joke, and not so thread-worn, that he better understands his limitations. Either way, whether you are celebrating his genius or asserting your position as the candid friend, you are forced to acknowledge at the last that your researches into Bernard Shaw are simply not in the same class with his own either in intimacy (which is surprising in an age when the press is often more intimate with a man than his own tooth-brush); in detachment and absence of favor (which, again, is surprising, in an age when men of letters take themselves very seriously); or in a se-

verely just recognition of the subject's merit (more surprising still in an age when public men carefully cultivate a reputation for modesty).

II

SHAW NOT AN ORIGINAL THINKER

THE third fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is a profoundly original thinker and a propagandist of absolutely new ideas. He has repeatedly told his readers and his friends that he is nothing of the kind. His biographer somewhere quotes him as saying, "I am an expert picker of men's brains, and I have been extremely fortunate in my friends." Nor need we go to Bernard Shaw's biographer for this. Bernard Shaw has spent half his life in telling the world the exact scientific truth about himself, and of course the world has refused to believe him. It is hardly ex-

aggeration to say that whenever Bernard Shaw tells people soberly and honestly exactly the sort of man he is, and exactly the kind of work he has done, they laugh heartily, and say that Bernard Shaw is a very funny and inventive person. Similarly, whenever he ventures into fun and fiction, his hearers insist upon taking him seriously as they would take a prophet.

It follows that Bernard Shaw, who is a modest, conscientious, kindly, industrious, and well-read man of letters, is commonly regarded as a reckless firebrand who lives by the cart and the trumpet, is up to his neck in all that is lawless and improper, is without compassion or shame, speaks always in paradoxes, and claims to be greater than Shakspere. Not fewer than fourteen years ago Bernard Shaw told the world

that he was an elderly gentleman who had made an immense reputation by being the best of a bad lot and by plagiarizing the English classics. He really meant what he said; but the preface in which he said it is still supposed to be the *locus classicus* of his claim to supersede the author of "Macbeth." Here, again, it is impossible to say of Bernard Shaw any true thing he has not already said of himself. He has repeatedly urged his critics and followers to reject utterly the legend of G. B. S. "I find myself," Bernard Shaw wrote in 1900, "while still in middle life almost as legendary a person as the *Flying Dutchman*. Critics, like other people, see what they look for, not what is actually before them. In my plays they look for my legendary qualities, and find originality and brilliancy in

my most hackneyed claptrap. Were I to republish Buckstone's 'Wreck Ashore' as my latest comedy, it would be hailed as a masterpiece of perverse paradox and scintillating satire."

Nothing in modern literary history is more remarkable than the reputation of G. B. S. for original and daring speculation; and no one, myself possibly excepted, more thoroughly appreciates the funny side of G. B. S. as philosopher than the man to whom this reputation is so persistently attached. Five years ago I came to London burdened with the classic wisdom of an ancient university. I had read some philosophy in one school and some economy in another. As a musician I had read Wagner for a venerable classic. As the merest Philistine in connoisseurship, I recognized in Rodin a great sculptor

of the last generation, as firmly established in immortality as Michelangelo, and I saluted in the New English Art Club a thoroughly respectable academy of painting. As a playgoer destined to succeed Max Beerbohm, who himself in remote antiquity had succeeded G. B. S. on the "Saturday Review," I had become weary of Ibsen, and had begun to wonder why Granville Barker seemed old enough to be my uncle. Now, I do not regard myself as being in the least in advance of my time; yet when I came to London I found that Bernard Shaw, who still preached Ibsen and Wagner, who spoke with Rodin as a contemporary, who preached a philosophy which was already introduced into examination-papers at a place not suspected of modernism, who talked economy out of university text-books

which it was a scholarly and pedantic exercise to confute in the lecture-rooms of Oxford—that this thoroughly safe, orthodox, and almost medieval Bernard Shaw was being received by the literary societies and the press of London as an original and revolutionary thinker. I then began to understand why Bernard Shaw has very little respect for some of his contemporaries.

III

THE "BETTER THAN SHAKESPEARE" FALLACY

THIS brings us to the fourth fallacy. The fourth fallacy is that Bernard Shaw has made enormous and extravagant claims for himself as a critic, philosopher, sociologist, and dramatist. Let us take a passage of Bernard Shaw's preface to the "Plays for Puritans." It is the famous "Better than Shakespeare" passage, the foundation of a public charge that George Bernard Shaw thinks too highly of himself. It is a conclusive proof that he does nothing of the kind. Observe also that it harks back to our second fallacy:

My stories are the old stories, my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloon (note the harlequin's leap in the third act of *Cæsar and Cleopatra*); my stage tricks and suspenses and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them. . . . It is a dangerous thing to be hailed at once, as a few rash admirers have hailed me, as above all things original; what the world calls originality is only an unaccustomed method of tickling it. Meyerbeer seemed prodigiously original to the Parisians, when he first burst on them. To-day he is only the crow who followed Beethoven's plough. I am a crow who have followed many ploughs. No doubt I seem prodigiously clever to those who have never hopped hungry and curious across the fields of philosophy, politics and art. Karl Marx said of Stuart Mill that his eminence was due to the flatness of the surrounding country. In these days of Board Schools, universal reading, newspa-

pers and the inevitable ensuing demand for notabilities of all sorts, literary, military, political and fashionable, to write paragraphs about, that sort of eminence is within the reach of very moderate ability. Reputations are cheap nowadays.

Who, after that, will say that Bernard Shaw has in him a particle of author's conceit? He has never claimed more than is due to him. There is not the least evidence of vanity or self-importance in the printed work of George Bernard Shaw, there is even less in his speeches, letters (the private letters of George Bernard Shaw will be his masterpiece when, and if, they ever come to be published), conversation, or general demeanor. It is true that he has frequently and vigorously claimed not to be entirely foolish, and that sometimes he has insisted that he really does

know what he is writing about. But it is also true that no critic has more persistently assured the public that there is nothing really important or new in any of the ideas and devices which so curiously amazed the first audiences of his early plays. Has he not soberly assured the American public that "the novelties of one generation are only the resuscitated fashions of the generation before last"? And has he not proved this with instances out of "The Devil's Disciple"? Did he not prophesy outright in 1900 that the lapse of a few years would expose that play for "the threadbare popular melodrama it technically is"?

Nevertheless, though it is possible for any one read in the works of Bernard Shaw to parallel these instances of self-assessment from almost any

volume, pamphlet, speech, or anecdote of his life, the belief still rules that Bernard Shaw is too highly appreciated by Bernard Shaw. The truth is that Bernard Shaw has had to expend vast stores of energy and time in reproving his friends for thinking too much of him and in snubbing the worship of his followers. He has had continually to explain to the superior socialists that he is not really a great orator; to the dramatic critics that he is not really the supreme dramatist who ever lived; to men of science that he is not the erudite physician they have imagined from "The Doctor's Dilemma" and not the expert in acoustics they have inferred from "Pygmalion"; to distracted heads of families that he is not in the least qualified to tell them how to control their marriageable daughters. Ber-

nard Shaw has worked harder to escape the greatness which is thrust upon him than many of his contemporaries have worked to achieve wealth and a blue ribbon; and the harder he has worked, the more convinced the public has become that he is an incorrigibly insolent and pertinacious champion of his title to be infallible.

It is essential to get this notion of Bernard Shaw as the *miles gloriosus* corrected at the start, otherwise we shall never handle the key to his achievement. You will ask how it has arisen. It has arisen simply and inevitably from the fact that Bernard Shaw was for many years of his life a professional critic, and that he was by nature able to regard himself and his own performances with complete detachment. Naturally, when he came to write plays, and

found that the said plays were incompetently criticized, he used his native gift for regarding himself impartially, and his acquired skill as a professional critic, to inform his readers exactly how good and how bad his plays really were, Hence he has acquired a reputation for vainglory, for it is a rooted idea with some people that a man who talks about himself is necessarily vainglorious.

Bernard Shaw's detached and disinterested observation of his own career and achievements is not within the power of the average man of letters. It was accordingly misunderstood. Not every one can discuss his own work as though it were the work of a stranger. The self-criticism of Bernard Shaw, read as a whole, shows an amazing literary altruism. It shows exactly how far he is from consenting to occupy

the throne into which he has been thrust. Bernard Shaw, in his prefaces, is not a prophet claiming inspiration for his script; he is one of the crowd that reads and judges for itself; only he reads and judges a little more closely and severely than the rest. Bernard Shaw's modesty—his curious aloofness from his own fame—is the more attractive in that it is absolutely innocent of stage-management. There are men who have made corners in retirement—men of whom it is at once exclaimed how humble and unspoiled they are. Shrewd observers will always suspect the man of letters who is famous for his modesty; who seems to think it positively indecent that his face should be seen; who has always "just left the theater" when there is a call to be taken; who has a reputation for inaccessibil-

ity. Bernard Shaw, of course, is entirely free of this organized and blushing humility. His very real modesty consists in his being able to assess himself correctly. He is one of the few living authors who has not been taken in by his own performances. It does not occur to him to divide the literature of the day into (a) the works of Bernard Shaw and (b) other people's works. He thinks of "Man and Superman" as he thinks of "The Silver Box." It is a play of contemporary interest and of some merit, and he does not see why he should be barred from discussing it as an expert critic just because he happens to be the author. Bernard Shaw has certainly imposed upon many of his friends and observers. He has not imposed upon himself.

IV

SHAW NOT A JESTER

THE fifth fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is an incorrigible jester, that he is never serious, that he is ready to sacrifice his best friend and his firmest conviction for the sake of a really good joke. Now, the first thing to realize about Bernard Shaw is his overflowing gravity. He has taken more things seriously in his career than any living and notable person. He has taken music seriously, and painting and socialism and philosophy and politics and public speaking. He has taken the trouble to make up his mind upon scores of things to which the average

heedless man hardly gives a second thought—things like diet, hygiene, vaccination, phonetic spelling, and vivisection. He has even taken seriously the English theater, unlike virtually every other English man of letters who has had anything to do with it. Compare for a moment the conduct of Bernard Shaw at a rehearsal of one of his own plays with the conduct, say, of Barrie. Barrie is happy so long as no one takes any notice of him. He has so immense a disdain for the minutiæ of theatrical production that he would rather write ten plays than control the rehearsal of one. Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, with the amazing industry of a really serious person, turns up with a closely written volume of notes, determining down to the minutest detail where, how, and when his company shall

deliver their lines and do their necessary "business." It is only because Bernard Shaw is so immensely serious that he can be so tremendously casual and brilliant. He is ready for everything and everybody because he has seriously considered everything and seriously regarded everybody. A first-rate impromptu usually indicates a mind richly stored and well arranged. Bernard Shaw can extemporize on most subjects because he has seriously thought about them. The more brilliantly he sparkles upon a given theme, the more sober has been his education in its rudiments. Unfortunately, many people have come to exactly the opposite conclusion. Because Bernard Shaw has a rapid and vital way of writing, because he presents his argument at a maximum, seasons it with boisterous analogies,

and frequently drives it home at the point of a hearty joke, he is suspected of sacrificing sense to sound. The dancing of his manner conceals the severe decorum of his matter. It is true that Bernard Shaw can be funny, but it is wholly false that he is in the least a flippant writer or a careless thinker. He is as serious as Praise-God Barebones and as careful as Octavius Cæsar.

V

HIS REPUDIATION OF REASON

THE sixth fallacy has to do with the all-head-and-no-heart formula. It is said of Bernard Shaw by some very excellent critics that he is an expert logician arguing *in vacuo,* that he has exalted reason as a god, that his mind is a wonderful machine which never goes wrong because its owner is not swayed by the ordinary passions, likes, prejudices, sentiments, impulses, infatuations, enthusiasms, and weaknesses of ordinary mankind. How the critics square this notion of Bernard Shaw with the kind friend and counselor who lives in Adelphi Terrace they

alone can tell. It is probably this idea of Bernard Shaw which most heartily tickles him. Bernard Shaw greatly enjoys contemplating the motley crowd of his legendary selves; but none can please him more thoroughly—because none could be more outrageously fictitious—than Bernard Shaw the vivisector of his kind, the high priest of reason and common sense.

This last superstition has grown mainly out of the simple fact that G. B. S. as a critic of music, art, and the drama was actually a critic. He took his criticism as seriously as he took his socialism or his conviction that tobacco was a noxious weed. Being a serious critic, he found it necessary to tell the truth concerning the artistic achievements of many sensitive and amiable young people. Naturally, Bernard

Shaw got the reputation of being a heartless brute for his candor, and a logical brute, owing to the soundness of his arguments. Then, when Bernard Shaw came to write plays, it was discovered that his young women behaved like reasonable creatures and that his young men appreciated the importance of five per cent. This was unusual in the soft, romantic stage creatures of the late nineties; so here was more evidence of Bernard Shaw's insensibility, of his arid and merciless rationalism, of his impenetrable indifference to all that warms the blood of common humanity.

Of course there was not the slightest real evidence of all this. If there is one idea more than another that persists all through the work of Bernard Shaw, and defines his personality, it

is to be found in his perpetual repudiation of reason. Almost his whole literary career has been spent in adapting the message of Schopenhauer to his own optimism and belief in the goodness of life. Not reason and not the categories determine or create, but passion and will. Bernard Shaw has always insisted that reason is no motive power; that the true motive power is will; that the setting up of reason above will is a damnable error. Life is the satisfaction of a power in us of which we can give no rational account whatever—that is the final declaration of Bernard Shaw; and his doctrine corresponds with his temperament. Rudyard Kipling has described the rationalists as men who "deal with people's insides from the point of view of men who have no stomachs." Bernard

Shaw would agree. No one, in habit or opinion, lives more remotely than Bernard Shaw from the clear, hard, logical, devitalised, and sapless world of Comte and Spencer.

VI

SHAW FAR FROM BEING AN ANARCHIST

THE seventh fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is an anarchist, a disturber of the peace, a champion of the right of every man to do as he pleases and to think for himself. This idea of Bernard Shaw is so deeply rooted in the public mind, despite Bernard Shaw's serious and repeated disclaimers of its accuracy, that, if any young person in London runs away from her parents, or if any elderly gentleman abandons his wife and family, these things are not only regarded as the results of Bernard Shaw's pernicious

teaching, but their perpetrators are upheld and justified by the belief that they are disciples following the lead of G. B. S. as prophet and master. These startling misconceptions have arisen from the fact that Bernard Shaw has pointed out in a popular play that children do not always agree in all points with their parents, and that he has argued in a less popular play that one or two reforms in the marriage laws of Great Britain are already overdue. Was ever a reputation won upon slenderer evidence? Why, Shakspere told us three hundred years ago how

> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
> That it had its head bit off by its young,

and it is now on record in a British blue-book that a committee of the most respectable gentlemen of the British bar

and church have agreed with Bernard Shaw that British divorce is unnecessarily expensive, inequitable, and humiliating. The practical extent of Bernard Shaw's anarchism coincides with the anarchism of our judges and our bishops.

Those who dig deeper than this, with the preconceived resolution to find that Bernard Shaw is an anarchist, will only be more hopelessly misled. They will find that he preaches, as we have already discovered, the ultimate supremacy of passion and will; that he sees the gods and the laws of each generation as mere expressions of the will and passion of their generation; and that he claims for posterity the right to supersede them as soon as posterity is moved by a higher will and a finer passion. But this is not anarchism. It is

so far from being anarchism that side by side with these doctrines Bernard Shaw has, in "The Sanity of Art," written down one of the best defenses of law and order—of the convenience and necessity of policemen, churches, and all kinds of public authority—that has appeared in popular form within recent years. It is true that Bernard Shaw pleads for liberty, and points out that it is better for a man to act and think responsibly for himself than to run to the nearest constable or parish priest. But it is also true that he wants people to have no more liberty than is good for them, and that he very seriously distrusts the ability of the average man to think for himself. Bernard Shaw knows that the average man has neither the time nor the brains nor the imagination to be original in such mat-

ters as crossing the road or getting married or determining whether he ought or ought not to cut the throat of his neighbor.

Nothing could be further from the mind of Bernard Shaw than the philosophic anarchy of Godwin or John Stuart Mill. Bernard Shaw is not an anarchist either in speculation or in practice. He is as sound on the question of law and order as Mr. Asquith. He is as correct in deportment and as regular in his conduct as the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford. The most pictorial way of emphasizing the difference between a real anarchist and Bernard Shaw is to compare the handwriting of Bernard Shaw and, say, of Cunninghame Graham. Bernard Shaw writes like a sensible citizen who intends his pages to be read. It is true that he as-

serts his individuality as one who values what is comely by writing the most beautiful hand of any author living, just as he insists that his books shall be printed in a style that proclaims him a pupil of William Morris. But he writes mainly to be read, aware that the liberty of writing illegibly is not worth the trouble it would give to a community which practised it. The writing of Cunninghame Graham, on the other hand, requires an expert in caligraphy. It has baffled half the big printing-houses in London. It is the last, insolent assertion that every man has the right to do as he pleases regardless of the discomfort and loss of time he thereby inflicts upon his neighbors. It is, in one word, anarchic, a graphic illustration of the great gulf that is fixed between two public figures of the time

who, nevertheless, have impartially been described by the careless as anarchists.

VII

SHAW A PRECISION RATHER THAN A CARELESS MAN OF LETTERS

THE eighth fallacy is that Bernard Shaw is a headlong, dashing, and opiniative writer, without technical equipment, who succeeds by an impudent trust in his unassisted genius, and brings off his best efforts by a happy fluke. This fallacy has stuck to Bernard Shaw all through his career as a critic of music, painting, the drama, as a playwright, as a pamphleteer, as a public speaker. When G. B. S., as Corno di Bassett, was writing about music for a London newspaper, the

public insisted that his appointment was a joke. It was the public's own joke, and the public enjoyed it immensely. Indeed, it chuckled so heartily that G. B. S. had not the malice to undeceive it. He played with this popular legend of himself, as he has so often played with a hundred others. He was thought to be merely a rude young man who knocked the professors' heads together without the least idea of what they contained. Bernard Shaw's characteristic confutation of this public error was to reduce it to absurdity. When people handed him a score, he held it carefully upside down and studied it in that position. When he was asked to play the piano, he walked to the wrong end. Bernard Shaw's conduct as a critic of music, acting under provocation, was very natural; but it was in

the result unfortunate. Popularly imagined to be an irresponsible amateur with a literary knack, Bernard Shaw, in all he has undertaken, has, if anything, erred from an excessive knowledge and interest in the expert professional and technical side of his subject. Bernard Shaw knew years ago all about the enormity of exploding undiminished chords of the ninth and thirteenth on the unsuspecting ear, just as to-day he thoroughly understands the appallingly scientific progressions of Scriabin. Similarly he can tell you the difference at a glance between real sunshine in an open field and the good north light of a Chelsea studio, or explain why "values" are more difficult to capture when colors are bright than when they are looked for in a dark interior. As to the technic

of the theater—well, the subject is hardly worth discussing. Some of his later plays are nothing if they are not technical.

The fallacy that Bernard Shaw is a happy savage among critics and artists, ignorant and careless of form, unread in the necessary conventions, speaking always at random with the confidence that only a perfect ignorance can give, is particularly deplorable, because it necessarily blinds its adherents to Bernard Shaw's most serious defect both as critic and creator. Usually Bernard Shaw knows too much, rather than too little, of his subject. He is too keenly interested in its bones and its mechanism. His famous distinction between music which is decorative and music which is dramatic is quite unsound, as I would undertake to show in nothing

less than a small pamphlet; but it is not the mistake of a critic ignorant of music. It is rather the mistake of a critic too keenly absorbed in the technic of music.

If the professors in the early nineties had objected to G. B. S. because he was liable to lapse into the pedantry of which they themselves were accused, they would have been nearer the mark than they were in foolishly dismissing him as an ignoramus. Similarly, as a dramatic critic, G. B. S. erred not by attaching too little value to the forms and conventions of the theater, but by attaching too much. It is true that he did not make the absurd mistake of some of his followers, and regard Ibsen as a great dramatist on account of one or two pettifogging and questionable reforms in dramatic convention, such

as the abolishing of soliloquies and asides and extra doors to the sitting-room. But he certainly attached too much importance to these things, mainly because he knew so much about them; and this critical insistence of his as a Saturday Reviewer has had its revenge in some of his own plays, where his purely technical mastery of theatrical devices, his stage-cleverness, and craftsman's virtuosity have led him into mechanical horse-play and stock positions unworthy of the author of "John Bull's Other Island" and "Major Barbara." Bernard Shaw has continually suffered from knowing his subject too well from the angle of the expert, and he has frequently fallen into the mistakes of the expert. Far from being the happy and careless privateer of popular belief, he is usually to be found struggling for

freedom under the oppression of things stored for reference in his capacious memory. The great critic, like any ordinary, unskilled spectator, should be able to look at a work of art without prejudice in favor of any particular form or fashion. It should not matter to him a jot or influence his judgment in the slightest whether the music he hears is symphonic or metrical, whether the thirteenth is exploded as a thirteenth or prepared as a six-four chord. He should be similarly indifferent whether a dramatist talks to him in blank-verse soliloquy or in conversational duologue. Preoccupation with manner, *apart from matter*—usually implying an *a priori* prejudice in favor of one manner over another—is the mark of pedantry; and of this pedantry —always the pedantry of a man who

is expert and knows too much—Bernard Shaw is not always free, though he is far too good a critic to be often at fault.

VIII

THE REAL SHAW

WE have not yet exhausted the popular fallacies about Bernard Shaw, but as most of my readers will already be wondering what is left of the man who has just described Sir Edward Grey as a Junker, I will turn now from George Bernard Shaw, who is as legendary as the *Flying Dutchman,* to the very positive and substantial author of "Commonsense and the War." I have yet to explain why Bernard Shaw, stripped of his professional masks, and rescued from the misconceptions of his admirers, remains one of the most striking public figures of our day, and must fairly be regarded

as the most important apparition in the British theater since Goldsmith and Sheridan. We have seen that Bernard Shaw is not original in what he preaches, is erudite rather than adventurous, is in no sense revolutionary or anarchical, is extremely serious, and is far from being an orgiastic and impudent rationalist for whom drifting humanity is stuff for a paradox. Bernard Shaw has not won the notice of mankind because he has thought of things which have hitherto occurred to no one else; nor has he won the notice of mankind because he has a native gift of buffoonery and a talent for the stage. The merit of Bernard Shaw has to be sought outside his doctrine. The secret of his genius lies deeper than his fun, and has scarcely anything to do with his craft.

It ironically happens that Bernard Shaw as a critic has virtually made it impossible for those who accept his criticism to allow that Bernard Shaw as a dramatic author has any right to be really famous. We have seen that Bernard Shaw as a critic repeatedly fell into the grievous error of separating the stuff he was criticizing into manner and matter. Thus, confronted with the Elizabethan dramatists, Bernard Shaw always maintained that they had nothing to say and that they were only tolerable because they had an incomparably wonderful way of saying it. Comparing Shakspere with Ibsen, for example, he would point out that, if you paraphrased Ibsen's "Peter Gynt," it still remained good intellectual stuff, and that, if you paraphrased Shakspere's "Life 's but a walking shadow," it be-

came the merest commonplace. Bernard Shaw thence proceeded to draw the moral that Ibsen, apart from mere favor and prettiness, was the greater and more penetrating dramatist. Fortunately for Bernard Shaw, as we shall shortly realize, this criticism of his is not only false in fact, but it is also nonsense in theory. It is false in fact, because it is quite untrue that Shakspere paraphrased is commonplace whereas Ibsen paraphrased is an intellectual feast. It would be more to the point if Bernard Shaw had said that Shakspere paraphrased is commonplace for all time and that Ibsen paraphrased is commonplace for only the nineteenth century. It would be still more to the point if Bernard Shaw had said that it is quite impossible to paraphrase any work of genius in so far as genius has

gone to its making. It is absurd to talk of paraphrasing Shakspere, because Shakspere is of genius all compact; and it is as true of Ibsen as of Shakspere that, so far as he is a genius and not merely a scientific naturalist, it is absurd to separate what he says from his way of saying it. When Shakspere has written:

> . . . Out, out, brief candle!
> Life 's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

he has written more than the equivalent of "life is not worth living." If Bernard Shaw will not admit that Shakspere in this passage is no more than an utterer of a universal platitude for

pessimists, he will have to agree that Ibsen is no more than an utterer of parochial platitude for the suffragette platform. Probably, however, now that Bernard Shaw has himself become a classical author, he has realized that to distinguish between the ideas of a literary genius and the language in which they are expressed is as absurd as to distinguish between the subject of a painter and the way in which it is painted, or between the themes of a musician and the notes in which they are rendered.

At any rate, Bernard Shaw must realize how very badly he himself would fare under such a distinction. We have seen that Bernard Shaw *in doctrine and idea* is in no sense original. His celebration of the state is as old as Plato. His particular sort of puri-

tanism is as old as Cromwell. His particular brand of socialism is as old as Owen. A paraphrase of Bernard Shaw—a reduction of Bernard Shaw to the bare bones of his subject matter—would be as intolerable as the speeches of his disciples and some of his masters usually are. In a word, if Bernard Shaw is a genius, he is a genius for the same reason that Shakspere is a genius. He is a genius not because he has anything new to say, but because he has a passionate and a personal way of saying it. If I had the time to go deeper into this matter, I should like to ask whether it is really possible to get hold of a new idea as distinguished from a new way of presenting an old one. But, at all events, I have already said enough to justify the assumption that, if Bernard Shaw can claim an immor-

tality, however brief, it will not be by virtue of his original, novel, and startling opinions, but by virtue of his literary presentation of them in a manner entirely his own. The equations read:

The ideas of Bernard Shaw = the commonplaces of his time.

The ideas of Bernard Shaw + his way of presenting them = G. B. S.

IX

PASSION AND STYLE THE SECRETS OF SHAW'S SUCCESS

BERNARD SHAW, then, has won the attention of the present generation, and he will hold the attention of posterity not because he has new theories about the world, but because, by virtue of strictly personal and inalienable qualities, he is able to give to the most "hackneyed clap-trap" (Bernard Shaw's own description) an air of novelty. Were he baldly to tell us that incomes should be equally divided, and that interest is an iniquitous and profoundly unsocial device invented by those who have too much money for the

purpose of levying blackmail upon those who have not enough, we should simply remember that we had read all this years ago in an old book and turn to something rather more worth our time and attention.

But when Bernard Shaw writes "Widower's Houses" or "Socialism and Superior Brains," it is quite another matter. Here we have original work of the first quality. The ideas are common to us all; but Bernard Shaw's presentation of these ideas thrills us with a conviction that nothing quite like it has ever come within our experience. We realize that we have never before encountered just this blend of wit and sense, this intellectual wrestle and thrust, this fervor and fun, this argumentative and syllabic virtuosity, this apparently impudent disregard of

style that only the more piquantly emphasizes a perfectly individual and highly cultivated literary art. Then we begin to wonder what is the inspiration of this rapid Jehu; whence does he get his impulse to drive all these ancient ideas so furiously through the modern world. How are we to explain the passion that fills him and lifts his work to levels higher than the platform he undertakes to fill? We are sensible in Bernard Shaw's best work of a horsepower, of a spiritual energy, which is no more the product of his doctrinal prejudice against rent and interest than the energy which drove Wagner to compose the *Nibelung's Ring* was the product of his desire to justify his revolutionary principles or to improve the operatic stage scenery of his generation. We know that the inspiration of

Bernard Shaw must be something deeper than a dislike of Roebuck Ramsden or a desire to abolish Mr. Sartorius. We know, in fact, that Bernard Shaw, like every man of genius, is the happy agent of a power and a passion which uses his prejudices, memories, and doctrines in a way he is intellectually powerless to resist.

The real thrill of his work is conveyed in some sentences of his preface to "Man and Superman"—sentences used by him in quite another connection:

> This is the true joy of life: the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap; the being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

To apply this passage to the work of Bernard Shaw is again to destroy the popular conception of him as merely the acute *raisonneur,* the intellectual critic of his kind, with a wallet of revolutionary propaganda whereby his reputation lives or dies. Not his doctrine and not his deliberate pulpiteering make Bernard Shaw a vital influence in modern literature. The real secret of his influence can be explained in a sentence. Bernard Shaw has passion and he has style. Therefore, like every man of genius, he is driven to say more than he intends, and to say it in an arresting voice.

It remains to ask what is the prime irritant of this passion in Bernard Shaw. Where are we to look for the catfish which keeps his mental aquarium alive and astir? First, without preliminary,

let us dart on that preface "Why for Puritans," which more than any other gives us the key to Bernard Shaw's work and character. Bernard Shaw writes as follows:

> I have, I think, always been a Puritan in my attitude towards Art. I am as fond of fine music and handsome buildings as Milton was, or Cromwell, or Bunyan; but if I found that they were becoming the instruments of a systematic idolatry of sensuousness, I would hold it good statesmanship to blow every cathedral in the world to pieces with dynamite, organ and all, without the least heed to the screams of the art critics and cultured voluptuaries.

Bernard Shaw's primal inspiration, that is to say, is not esthetic or intellectual, but moral. We have to reckon with a moral fury where he most individually rages. The demon which

seizes his pen at the critical moment, and uses him for its own enthusiastic purpose, is the demon which drove Milton to destroy Arminius. When Bernard Shaw imagines that he coolly and reasonably desires, simply as a practical socialist and in the name of common sense, to nationalize land and capital, and give to everybody as much money as he requires, he is mistaken. Like every other prophet who has succeeded in moving his generation, Bernard Shaw begins with a passion and a prejudice, and afterward manufactures and systematizes the evidence. That Bernard Shaw is a socialist is an accident of the time. The essential thing is that Bernard Shaw passionately hates all that is complacent, malevolent, callous, inequitable, oppressive, unsocial, stupid, irreligious, enervating, narrow,

misinformed, unimaginative, lazy, envious, unclean, disloyal, mercenary, and extravagant. Hating all this with the positive, energetic, and proselytizing hatred of an incorrigible moralist, he has naturally seized on the biggest and most adequate stick in reach with which to beat the nineteenth-century sinner. This stick happened to be the socialist stick. If G. B. S. had lived with Grosseteste in the thirteenth century, it would have been the no-taxation-without-representation stick. If he had lived with Star Chamber in the sixteenth century, it would have been the Habeas Corpus stick. If he had lived with Rousseau in the eighteenth century, it would have been the social-contract-and-law-of-nature stick. Bernard Shaw's socialism stick is simply his weapon—the most convenient

weapon to hand—with which to convict a society founded upon capitalism of the greatest possible amount of sin with the least possible opportunity of an overwhelming retort from the sinner. The important thing is not that Bernard Shaw preaches socialism, but that he uses the doctrines of socialism as Cromwell's troopers used the psalms of David or as Tolstoy used the gospels of Christ—namely, to put the unjust man and his evil ways out of court and countenance. To this end he employs also his craft as a dialectician, his gift as a stylist, his clear exposition and wit, his fun, irony, observation of men, genius for mystification and effective pose —all, indeed, that enters into the public idea of G. B. S. These things are merely auxiliary; any moment they are likely to be caught up in the service of

his passionate mission—a mission of which Bernard Shaw is often himself aware when he is most firmly under its dominion.

X

OUR MODERN TREATMENT OF PROPHETS

THIS brings us within view of Bernard Shaw's pamphlet on the war. It is natural in a preacher that the most unpardonable sin of the many he is called to denounce should be the sin of complacency; for the sin of complacency virtually amounts to the sin of refusing to hear what the preacher has to say, or, at all events, of refusing to take it seriously. Bernard Shaw has said continuously for many years that the average man is an unsocial sinner; and the average man, instead of hanging his head and mending his ways, has smiled in the face of the prophet. At

one time the prophet was stoned, and at another time he was poisoned or ostracized or pelted in the pillory. But we have lately learned a more effective way of dealing with a prophet: either we turn him into a society preacher and enjoy his denunciation of what our neighbors do, or we pay him handsomely to amuse us in the theater. We have thus improved immensely on the methods of the scribe and the Pharisee; for where the scribe and the Pharisee destroyed only the bodies of their prophets, we, with an even more thorough complacency, aim also at destroying their souls—usually with some success.

But the British public has not succeeded with Bernard Shaw, who continues to be periodically stirred to frenzy by his inability to make every

one realize that he or she is directly responsible for all the crimes and miseries of modern civilization. Moreover, because Bernard Shaw has lived most of his life in England, and has therefore been less seriously taken in England than elsewhere, he has concluded that the English are more complacent than any other people in the world. More and more he has come to regard it as his special mission to humble this complacency, to convict the Englishman, above all men, of sin, and of the necessity for humility and repentance. Therefore, whenever the British public becomes, in the view of Bernard Shaw, unduly exalted,—whenever, in fact, it thinks it has a reason to be proud of the British name,—Bernard Shaw is at once suspicious and usually incensed. Latterly he has been unable to resist

any occasion of pricking the inflation, real or imagined, of the British spirit; and latterly, misled by habit, and exaggerating the sins he was born to chastise, Bernard Shaw has made some serious mistakes.

Thus when, more than two years ago, the whole British nation was struck with grief at the loss of the *Titanic,* and was reading with a reasonable pride of the splendid behavior of her heroic crew, Bernard Shaw rose in his robe of the prophet and told the public not to exaggerate its vicarious gallantry. Then in August, 1914, when Great Britain was straining every nerve to get her army to the Continent in time to save Belgium from the worst of war, Bernard Shaw published an article in the British press virtually to the effect that Great Britain was not fighting for the

sanctity of treaties or the rights of a little nation, but for British homes and British skins. Maliciously he chose for the publication of this assault upon British complacency the most obstinately and hatefully complacent British newspaper at his disposal.

Finally there came the celebrated pamphlet "Commonsense and the War." This must be read as Bernard Shaw's most audacious effort to puncture the self-esteem of the British public. It has caused much brain-searching among those who have simply regarded George Bernard Shaw as a very discreet and financially successful mountebank; for Bernard Shaw, in writing this pamphlet, has done a clearly unpopular thing. Undoubtedly he has angered and estranged many of his admirers. Some regard the pam-

phlet as an obscure attempt to discredit the allied cause. Others regard it as an escapade of revolting levity, inexpedient from a patriotic point of view and essentially wrong in its conclusions. The real point that concerns us here is that the pamphlet is not a new, unexpected, or isolated performance of Bernard Shaw, but a natural sequel of all he has hitherto written. Those who have followed Bernard Shaw to the threshold of his pamphlet on the war have no right at this time to be astonished or to refuse him their applause. "Commonsense and the War" is simply a topical and a later edition of "Widower's Houses." That is to say, it is a tract in which the case against British complacency is put at a maximum by a fearless and passionate advocate for the prosecution.

Not Bernard Shaw, but the time, has changed. Here we strike at the root of Bernard Shaw's mistake. Hitherto, he was doing salutary work in his campaign against the silent self-assurance of the mean, sensual man. There are as many complacent persons in Great Britain as elsewhere, and so long as Great Britain was at peace with her neighbors, it was beneficial that Bernard Shaw should imagine that the British, among whom he lived, were more guilty in this respect than any other extant community, and that he should lose no opportunity for satirical, ironical, comic, or didactic reproof. But when Great Britain and her allies had their back to the wall, when there were opponents to be countered and met, Bernard Shaw's insular mistake that the British as a nation are any more

complacent than any other nation with a past to be proud of and a future to believe in became a really injurious heresy. It began, indeed, to look rather like giving away his people to the enemy. Of course it was nothing of the kind. "Commonsense and the War," intelligently read, vibrates with patriotism, and it proudly proclaims the essential rightness of the struggle in which Great Britain is now engaged. But the patriotism of "Commonsense and the War" is less apparent to the audiences which laugh at Bernard Shaw in the theater and outrageously regard him as a privileged fool at the court of King Demos, than the fact that it begins by asserting that Sir Edward Grey is a Junker, and goes on to examine very particularly whether we really have the right to condemn our enemies

without a preliminary inquiry into our own consciences and affairs.

Bernard Shaw has made a mistake, but it is a natural, not an ignoble, mistake. It will have no permanent effect upon those who are sensible, even in Bernard Shaw's most special pleading, of the passionate moral sincerity which gives consistency and fire to all he writes. "Commonsense and the War" was a blunder; but it was also an act of disinterested courage. It was not dictated by any wish to stand in front of the picture or to splash in a sea too deep for purposes of exhibition. Bernard Shaw, in writing "Commonsense and the War," is simply the priest who insists upon sacrifice before going into battle, or believe that every good fight should be preceded by confession, absolution, and high mass.

One word more. Bernard Shaw, the prophet and the puritan, lives in his work. But the passion which gives him uniformity and purpose as a public figure has not impaired his personal humor, his tolerance for all that is sweet and commendable, his broadness of view and eagerly inquisitive outlook upon life, his candor and honesty of mind, his generous welcome of new ideas, his love of beautiful things, his ability to appreciate and sympathize even with those forces which are banded to destroy him. These are the qualities which have obscured from contemporaries the essential simplicity of his mind, and have warmly endeared him to the younger generation of authors and critics who have learned from their master how profitably they may supersede him. This younger generation, though it very frequently

turns the weapons of Bernard Shaw against himself, will never forget or neglect the debt it owes to the helpful, patient, and wise counselor it has been privileged to observe and know.

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